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ABSTRACT

It is necessary to develop some comparative indicators in order to describe and compare the systems of education in countries other than one's own. Access to higher education is an important indicator. Currently, 50 percent of the Swedish adult population takes part in some organized learning activity every year and 50 percent of the student population in higher education is composed of adults 25 years old or older. Two principal channels through which adults prepare for higher education are the residential college for adults called the Swedish Folk High School and, most important, the system of municipal adult education called Kumvux. About 13 percent of the Kumvux students begin studies at levels of higher education. The National Board of Education provides an orientation course for adult students and a national education admission test, which gives potential adult students a chance to take university courses. Compulsory school ends at age 16, but more than 90 percent of students continue to the upper secondary level and two-thirds of them take vocational programs for 2 years. A few programs aim at increasing access to higher education for "earmarked" groups of adult students, such as trade union members, women, technicians, and disabled students. Sweden faces a strategic decision about whether to renew the system of higher education as it is or concentrate on developing recruitment strategies for neglected or underrepresented learners. (The document includes 12 references.) (CML)

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"FIFTY-FIFTY?"

Comparative Comments on Access to Adult and Higher Education in Sweden

By Kenneth Abrahamsson

Paper at an International Conference on
ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION
held on March 20-21, 1989 at the
South Bank Polytechnic, London, U.K.

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March, 1989
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SWEDISH NATIONAL BOARD OF EDUCATION
Division of Adult Education
Kenneth Abrahamsson

"FIFTY-FIFTY?"

1989-03-29

A Dialogue on International Comparisons

Foreign Observer (FO): Can you tell me what was the outcome of the Swedish policy on recurrent education implemented during the seventies?

Swedish Participant (SP): Fifty - Fifty!

FO: What do you mean by "fifty - fifty"... two steps forward and two steps back?

SP: No, even though you are right that it is always difficult to achieve four different goals at the same time. What I mean is that fifty percent of the Swedish adult population take part in some organized learning activity during one single year and that fifty percent of the student population in higher education are adults (25 years of age or more).

FO: Do you have any other indicators of the "fifty - fifty-policy"?

SP: No, but we have the policy of "forty-sixty" - meaning that in each field in society there should be as far as possible an equal distribution according to sex and this is, of course, very important in education!

FO: And what about the impact of this policy?

SP: Not very good. We have sixty percent female and forty male participants in Swedish higher education, although their educational choices tend to be very conventional.....

FO: You seem to be almost obsessed by statistics! Do you have any other figures to mention?

SP: Many, but then you have to read my paper. One very good figure is, of course, the low level of unemployment (less than 2%). A more alarming fact is that there is some evidence showing that equal opportunity has decreased during the period after the reform of higher education of 1977. Among the new entrants, students with well-educated parents have increased at the expense of students with a working class background. It seems that the relatively well-educated second-chance learners have taken places from the young students coming from a less educated background.

FO: How sad!

SP: Yes, indeed!

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1. A Comparative Prologue

The simulated dialogue between a **foreign observer and a Swedish participant** illustrates the problem of use and abuse of statistics with a comparative objective in mind. Behind each single figure or statistical diagram, there are several structural, economical and cultural factors that must be taken into consideration in cross-national comparisons. What lessons could be learned from studies on the educational systems of other countries or visits to them in order to learn more about the way they work? The recently published Encyclopedia of Comparative Education (Postlethwaite, ed., 1988) gives many perspectives on these issues showing that a comparative mission can never result in simple yes-no answers. In 1900 Sir Michael Sadler wrote an article on: "How far can we learn anything of practical value from the study of foreign systems of education?" after a study visit to Germany. His conclusion was that one learned more about perspectives and values, but not specific methods. In a more modern comparative approach it is necessary to develop some **educational indicators** to describe and compare the phenomenon which is to be studied.

If we focus on access as a broadened social recruitment to post-compulsory education, we have to describe the composition and change of the **(adult) student population** at different levels. Starting with this ambition, the following questions might be relevant to answer for different countries:

a) What is the percentage of individuals with a background of higher education in the labour force today and what projections can be made for the forthcoming two decades? (In Sweden it is 15 % today and 21 % the year 2010).

b) What is the transition rate from upper secondary schools to higher education in different countries and what projections can be made for the coming two decades? (In Sweden it varies between 21 % and 33 % depending on assessment criteria).

c) What is the inflow of adult students from alternative access channels to different programmes and courses in higher education? In Sweden, there has been a strong decrease in the number of students admitted through specific access channels the last decade (fewer applicants through the work experience scheme, the so called 25:4 - students, fewer students through folk high schools and also fewer students with a foreign educational background). It is too early to conclude that the relative proportion of new entrants with this background has decreased. This is because they can have chosen prepare themselves better by taking advantage of the system of municipal adult education in addition to making use of their prior learning of a non-formal nature.

Furthermore, we have to match their educational background with a choice of programmes or studies in higher education. In this case, it is more difficult to develop comprehensive indicators as one has to take into consideration whether they are:

1) degree programmes or shorter courses

2) credit or non-credit courses

3) programmes especially designed to meet the needs of various groups of adults (such as women, trade unionists, immigrants, etc.).

d) What is the relative proportion of "priority groups" in higher education in comparison to the population as a whole (women, immigrants/ethnic minorities, disabled, adults with short formal education, etc.) Also, which objectives should be set for the next century?

e) Which are the different forms of financial study assistance for adults in higher education and how is leave of absence for purposes of studying guaranteed in different countries?

2. The Educational Context of Access in Sweden

Access to higher education is an important comparative indicator, when we want to look at different systems of higher education. The recruitment to higher education is traditionally tainted by a social bias. The most common policy approach to counteract this unwanted social selection has been to set up new institutions to better meet the needs and interests of students that are neglected or even rejected in the traditional system of higher education. During the sixties and the seventies, a number of new institutional initiatives were implemented. One of the most common examples is, of course, the Open University in the U.K., which has been followed by a number of similar institutions in other countries.

In recent years, some of these institutions have broadened their provision of programmes and courses from degree studies to a set of credit courses and from credit courses to non-credit courses. Other, nowadays to some extent "traditional" innovations, are the polytechnics, the Open College idea and the recognition of prior learning (Abrahamsson, Rubenson and Slowey, 1988). One of the most dynamic changes in this area is the rapid growth of corporate classrooms and learning at the workplace. Policies for increasing access to higher education in the U.K. have recently been discussed in the report "Action for Access - Widening Opportunities in Higher Education" by the National Advisory Body for Public Sector Higher Education. The NAB report genuinely illustrates the complexity of this policy area when in summary it gives 47 recommendations to a variety of institutions at different organizational levels. It is a difficult message to receive since the level of access is supposed to increase in a restricted financial climate with strong incentives for a more open market orientation.

Therefore, access to higher studies cannot be discussed separately from the political process and the institutional transformation going on in the field of higher education. Furthermore, the notion of access has to be related to both the number of and learning conditions of different alternative routes to adult and higher education. Taking these ideas into consideration, it could be of some importance to describe the Swedish situation in a European context:

2.1 Homogeneous Country

Sweden is a rather homogeneous and politically stable country, with not more than 10 % of immigrants. All immigrants coming to Sweden are entitled to a specific language programme in Swedish and their children are entitled to additional instruction in their home language in the schools. Policies and institutional support for immigrants and foreign students have in part different orientational aspects. One important human resource development problem is how to recognize and use prior learning and education of immigrants.

2.2 Low Unemployment Rate

Sweden has a very low level of unemployment, at present less than 2 % of the labour force as such. In fact, one of the new groups of temporarily unemployed will be teachers in some of our labour market training programmes, who as a consequence of a low unemployment rate have lost many of their potential students. The present government has a strong dedication to a policy of full employment. As many Western countries, Sweden is facing a new demographic shift, sometimes labelled the "Age Shock". The shortage of young and well-educated labour will increase in the future, while the number of adults - both in the labour force and retired - will be growing rapidly. Projecting this change a decade further on, it is not surprising if we meet a strongly increased demand of higher education relating to adults.

2.3 Broad Provision of Adult Education

Sweden has a number of alternative routes for adult education that a) might stimulate further studies at a higher education level b) might satisfy needs of adult learning at another and sometimes more functionally relevant level than higher education. In general one could say that half the adult population will take part in some kind of adult studies during a single specific year (see appendix). Of course, just a small group will attend full-time studies. Concerning competence-related studies, part-time programmes are the most common and the generally high level of participation is explained mainly by study circles and in-service training.

Two channels are of special interest for further higher education. Firstly, we have the Swedish Folk High School (a residential college for adults), which both traditionally and also in the present day and age plays an important role for working adults with prospective ideas or future dreams of higher studies. The most important channel of access is, however, the system of municipal adult education (Komvux). It is a parallel school for adults with the same objectives and standards as education for young people, but with the aim of adapting the curriculum, process and content to the needs of the adult students. Municipal adult education is provided at the upper grades of the compulsory school system as well at the level of upper secondary education. In recent years, around 13% of ("second chance") students within municipal education have started studies at levels of higher education.

In addition to these two access channels there have been a number of initiatives relating to information and counselling. The NBE has developed a national curriculum for an orientation course for adult students. A national higher education admission test has also been implemented to give potential adult students a second chance to take university courses. It is not compulsory, although it can be used to get additional merits. It will, however, be connected with a specific access channel in a forthcoming reform of the admission system in 1991.

2.4 Expanding Upper Secondary Education

Furthermore, one of the most important policy initiatives to increase access to higher education in Sweden has been to expand the system of upper secondary schooling to all pupils leaving the nine year compulsory school (from ages 7 - 16). Today, more than 90% of school leavers continue to the upper secondary level and two-thirds of them take vocational programmes for two years. Recently, a national experimental scheme started with three year vocational programmes. One the objectives was to increase opportunities for higher studies within under-represented social groups. Still, there is a rather low level of transition to higher education from many of the two-year programmes. The level of transition from upper secondary to higher education varies from 21-33 % depending on the choice of assessment criteria. These figures are lower than the United States or Japan, but higher than the U.K.(?).

2.5 An Integrated System of Higher Education

Finally, the notion of a comprehensive and integrated system of higher education has been an integral part of the Swedish policies for post-compulsory education. With some simplification, one could say that the whole system of higher education should accept the responsibility for the implementation of access to higher education. Thus, the system has been designed to meet the needs of young and adult students in the same organizational setting. An important policy dimension has been the regional and geographical distribution of higher education all around the country. In recent years, special attention has been paid to the further development of medium-size colleges launched as a part of the reform of higher education in 1977.

3. Alternative Routes to Higher Education - Some Swedish Experiences

There are only a few examples of alternative channels for adults in Sweden. There was a discussion during the mid-seventies as to whether or not Sweden should establish its own Open University, but the policy that was taken made distance education a responsibility of all institutions of higher learning (taking into consideration, of course, that Sweden is a small country). The most well-known policy relating to access was the widened admission procedure in 1969 giving adults of the age of 25 years or more and with 5 (later on 4) years of work and life experience increasing opportunities to embark on higher studies (Kim, 1982). By the beginning of the eighties, there had been such a strong participation of adults in higher education that I coined the notion of **"the adultification of higher education in Sweden"** (Abrahamsson, 1986). The balance between the interests and needs of young and adult students tended to become so unequal that most policies taken during the eighties in Sweden have aimed at giving young students better chances.

There are, however, a few experimental schemes and other measures aimed at increasing access to higher education in Sweden for "earmarked" groups of adult students:

a) The Swedish Trade Union Confederation and the Federation of Professional Employees have developed joint higher education courses for their members. They are mainly short, separate courses and may be more interesting as single examples rather than in a larger context. Trade unionists, university teachers and research fellows have formed their own "research circles" to expand the knowledge and horizons of trade union members.

b) The policy of equal distribution of sex has resulted in a number of initiatives to increase women participants in areas of technology. Furthermore, women's study programmes and women's research centres have been developed at some university cities over the country.

c) Vocational programmes for technicians are provided in different sectors of the labour market since the reform of higher education in 1977.(YTH).

d) Recently, some large enterprises have started in-house training at a higher education level, which could be described as a Swedish response to the idea of **corporate classrooms**.

e) The Swedish Educational Broadcasting Corporation, which is a proponent of public broadcasting ideals within adult and higher education, has provided a number of distance programmes at higher education level, and often in collaboration with universities and colleges.

f) Extramural education has a long tradition, beginning at the end of the 19th century (to some extent influenced by British ideals from the University-Extension Movement). In the fifties and sixties, the provision of extramural higher education, often in the form of **university circles**, sometimes took the form of a "hidden college" for adults. Today, the idea of the university circle has lost its value, mainly as a consequence of a broad provision of programmes and courses within the formal system of higher education. Still, there is a broad provision of higher education courses by at least two so called Educational Associations (Independent educational organizations that receive support from the state in order to organize study circles).

g) Unfortunately, we lack a clear picture of immigrant students in adult and higher education as they normally embark on the same kind of programmes and courses as native students and there are not many specific statistics to be obtained. This problem can also have different facets. One aspect is that some **foreign students** receive higher education in Sweden with the intending of going back to their home country. Then the problem is to assess their formal merits for entry and to give them necessary skills in the Swedish language (together with the arrangement of a supportive study environment). Preparatory courses are usually provided at many universites and colleges.

Another problem is to what extent adult immigrants intending to stay in Sweden will use the different routes to adult and higher education. The role of immigrants at a level of upper secondary and higher education has recently been analyzed by Myrberg (1988) in a review. He mentions the problem of arriving at accurate statistics, but also points at the strong rise in educational standards taking place among immigrants during the last decade. It is necessary, however, to deepen our knowledge of how responsive Swedish higher education is to immigrants with different educational, cultural and economic backgrounds.

In a study carried out by the Swedish National Board of Education, 400 immigrants were asked about their view of formal accreditation of their educational merits. 70% stated that the assessment was acceptable according to foreign standards and 50% said that it was useful to have the formal merits on the labour market. In another project, the Swedish Labour Market Board is at present developing a database on the accreditation of foreign educational and vocational standards.

g) Finally, there are also some initiatives concerning disabled students in higher education. These problems are often treated individually, depending on the type of handicap involved. The use of computers and new technology have expanded the learning horizons for disabled students considerably the last years.

4. Some Questions for Policy Makers of Access Actions for Neglected Adult Students

Having these comparative points in mind, it might be interesting to raise the following questions:

a) Do we want to increase the access of adults in higher education? If your answer is yes, the following question may follow:

b) Should we try to develop comprehensive strategies for the whole educational system (as the notion of recurrent education, which has been one of the main ideas behind the reform of Swedish post-compulsory education) or is it a more successful policy to give the task to certain institutions of higher learning (if so, then which institutions?). What are the pros and cons for an access-course model? How can we counteract the effect of stigmatization and overcome the risk of access channels becoming not only a learning route for second chance students, but also a second class form of higher learning?

c) How should we counteract the traditional barriers to higher learning for ordinary working people? Should one, as in Sweden, develop and support policies for an Educational Leave of Absence Act within the E.E.C.? And, at what level will it be possible to provide acceptable study finance for adults wanting to embark on higher studies? How should we develop better methods of information and counselling oriented towards the needs of neglected learners? What could be learned from the Swedish experience in using trade union members and the trade unions as recruitment channels to adult education?

d) What kind of introductory programmes and procedures should be developed in order not to frighten new students, but to give them the necessary self-reliance and study skills for higher studies? To what extent will it be possible to develop diagnostic tests both for level of subject knowledge and for general study skills (some researchers doubt that this can be assessed in the first place!).

e) Finally in what way should we try to change the academic context and learning environment to better take the knowledge and experience of adults into consideration? What should be the balance between formal lectures and traditional written examination on the one hand and project studies, group work and group examination on the other hand?

In what ways should adult students be treated differently from young or conventional students? Or are we just trying to gain support for the myth of the typical adult students, when the most typical dimension is variation, heterogeneity and multi-dimensional and sometimes also multi-cultural backgrounds.

5. Towards a Comprehensive Strategy - Some Concluding Remarks

To conclude, I would like to summarize my ideas by saying that we are facing a strategic problem, namely whether or not we should **renew the system of higher education as such or if we should concentrate our ambitions on developing earmarked recruitment strategies for neglected or under-represented learners?**

With reference to the above I would like to relate an interesting observation concerning comparisons between Sweden and the U.K. What is termed the "access-phenomenon" seems to be more widespread in the United Kingdom than it is in Sweden. There are both positive and negative aspects to be seen. One positive aspect is that many people - university administrators, counsellors and teachers - take an active part in giving groups outside normal channels of recruitment admission to higher education. However there is a risk that all such activities become permanent and come to be considered a kind of second-class or third-class form of higher education if those taking part are not able to change over quickly to ordinary forms of education.

As far as Sweden is concerned there seems to be another hazard at hand, namely the fact that we have become content with the new organizational changes in higher education, improvements in the system of admissions (with more stress placed on the needs of young students) and the new examination for admission to higher education which will be used beginning in 1991. The problem is that administrative impartiality - although perfect in theory - can never become a replacement for social commitment and concern that is needed on the part of teachers, counsellors and administrators so that the recruitment of adults to education can be widened and deepened in a truly social aspect.

It is in this respect that Sweden has much to learn from the "access-course phenomenon" in the United Kingdom. In the same way the U.K. needs to develop a more comprehensive strategy which will expand rather than constrict in those cases where social selection to universities and institutes of higher education is capable of expansion and development.

If we choose a general renewal strategy, it will be more and more important to define which roles universities and colleges should take within a system of recurrent education and lifelong learning. Which consequences must be resolved when formulating necessary admission requirements? What criteria of necessary knowledge level and qualification structure should be the point of departure for future-oriented strategies in the field of higher education? Should we support the idea that a general increase in the level of higher education is a positive and healthy sign of the society? Is "over-education" per se the most constructive future approach? Or should, as one usually does in Sweden, project the needs for different sectors of working life and provide student places in accordance with that?

Access policies have to start from more general educational policies. In Sweden, affirmative actions for adults have mainly been created within other forms of adult and continuing education rather than in higher education. Adults as such are no more important and have never been the most important target group for higher education. A more strategic question for Swedish higher education is open higher education for non-traditional young students in order to counteract the increasing inequalities of enrollment during the last decade. Some of the social barriers to higher studies of young students with working class background have recently been studied by Arnman & Jönsson (1989). Social segregation in combination with low marks tend to be the most efficient selection mechanism.

Remedial measures, compensatory missions and open-door policies still have an important function of giving neglected adults or young students of today new life-chances tomorrow. In this respect it is worthwhile to consider how the lessons from the British access-phenomenon could be best used in a Swedish context. Furthermore, it is necessary to make the organization more open and responsive to the increasing need of further education and training of professional and semi-professional groups in society (Kim & Brandell, 1988).

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